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Science, Scripture, and the Hermeneutics of Ascension

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Abstract

From the perspective of science-religion dialogue, the ascension of Jesus represents one of the most challenging of all Christian doctrines to negotiate. It necessitates, on the one hand, the interpretation of richly-allusive and diverse biblical texts, and on the other hand, the resolution of scientific and theological paradoxes at the edge of conceptualisation. I suggest a possible way forward which makes use of a conversational approach informed by Gadamerian hermeneutics. This keeps the peculiarities and particularities of individual texts foremost, and allows the perspectives of science, theology and biblical studies to engage at first hand over them.

Keywords: Jesus, ascension, Christology, hermeneutics, biblical study, physics

Introduction

In spite of its earth-shattering promise, the ascension of Christ has been somewhat overlooked in modern theological writing. Douglas Farrow, one of its few recent advocates, says, ‘Today [the ascension] is something of an embarrassment’ (Farrow 1999, 9). At least in part, this embarrassment arises from modern scientific views of time and space, and especially from the sea change in cosmological thinking brought about by the Copernican revolution. Indeed, from this point of view, affirming the ascension of Jesus poses a unique challenge to science-religion dialogue, since on face value it suggests an unprecedented equation of scientific and theological descriptions of reality. However, as I will argue, engaging with the ascension of Jesus as much involves interpreting key texts as it does grappling with views of reality. In this, I will suggest a new way of proceeding in the science-religion field, a way of reading scriptural metaphor and symbol theologically, through dialogue between science and biblical criticism.

If it is not too much to say that modern theology has neglected the ascension (Fergusson 2012, 93), then the modern science-religion field has neglected Scripture. The dominance of philosophy as the mediating language of choice (Shults 2008, 4) has meant that the dialogue between science and theology has tended to operate at something of a remove from the basic data and core observations that underlie scientific models and religious beliefs. Scientist-theologians grapple with the ‘grand ideas’, but they do not often ask whether the data – especially the richly diverse, and at times contradictory, data of Christian Scripture – support such grappling. The introduction of science into theology has raised a hermeneutical question about the treatment of core texts that has not so far been framed clearly.

This hermeneutical question is nowhere more obvious than with the opening chapters of Genesis, a hermeneutical minefield thanks to modern science. At one extreme there are the young-earth creationists, who are so certain that their hermeneutic is correct that they have developed their own types of science to agree with it: ‘creation science’ and ‘flood geology’.

More moderate – but equally committed to the text – are other types of creationist and fundamentalist, including many supporters of Intelligent Design. In all of these positions, the scriptural hermeneutic incorporates an explicitly scientific component that to a greater or lesser degree is derived from theological presuppositions: the science serves the religious ideology. At the other extreme there are those who are inclined to let science be science, and the Bible be the Bible, without expecting either to agree on the vexed question of beginnings. But even here we often find traces of a questionable hermeneutic, for in order that the Bible should retain its status as hallowed ground, scientific questions are pointedly not asked of it: the creation accounts of Genesis become ‘metaphor’, or ‘mythology’ (or at best, ‘theology’), but the text is barely engaged with on its own historical and contextual grounds, which necessarily include *ancient* science, and *ancient* functional and ontological categories alien to our modern world. And so all of these approaches effectively place the text in a framework it was not constructed to inhabit, and judge it according to criteria it could not possibly have anticipated.

Quite simply, we read the Bible differently these days; modern science has made all the difference, changing the hermeneutical horizons, so that – in the case of this core text at least (Gen.1-3) – there is a complex network of interactions between science and religion which Barbour’s celebrated fourfold typology simply cannot account for. This is neither conflict nor integration, neither independence nor dialogue, but confusion.

In the face of such confusion, this article suggests the need for a hermeneutic that takes both science and biblical scholarship seriously in the light of theological approaches to reality. It will be argued that a Gadamerian approach to the ascension, with its unique interplay of scientific, theological, and scriptural realities, provides an illuminating test case for the development of such a hermeneutic.

The question of reality

First, it is worth highlighting some of the potential pitfalls that arise when modern science is incorporated into the scriptural hermeneutic. The presuppositions of creationism – that the text is inerrant and should be read ‘literally’ – are surprisingly pervasive, and even mainstream scientists who write on the Bible often display them unwittingly. A good example is provided by the scientific literature on the miracles of the Exodus, and especially the story of the crossing of the Red Sea (Harris 2007). A number of scientific models have been proposed which are able, by and large, to ‘explain’ the miracle of the parting of the waters using well-understood phenomena such as the tsunami, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tides, or storm winds. Indeed, such is the ingenuity of modern science that there is barely a miracle story in the Bible that cannot be ‘explained’ by such approaches. This has interesting consequences for how we understand ‘miracle’, especially if we are wedded to Hume’s famous definition of miracle as a transgression of the laws of nature. But for now, we are more concerned with the hermeneutical presuppositions involved, for we observe that in these scientific studies the text is invariably taken at face value, and a direct correspondence is assumed between it and the reality it appears to describe. The scientific models are assumed to reveal in some way ‘what really happened’. This approach is, of course, the keystone of creationist readings of Scripture.

Critical biblical scholarship, on the other hand, has a more subtle and complex understanding of the reality which may or may not lie behind the biblical texts, an understanding informed

by at least two centuries of close textual and historical study, and an active awareness of key hermeneutical presuppositions. But in a case like the Red Sea crossing, it is observed that the scientists, like the creationists, often overlook the biblical scholarship: reading the text literally, usually in English translation, they appear to assume that their scientific training gives them the necessary tools to interpret it as it is. Neither the considerable linguistic and semantic difficulties of the text are acknowledged, nor the importance of recognising mythological and symbolic devices, nor the complex historical processes by which the text grew and came into being. A methodological blind spot is apparent, forged by a literalist mentality; there is something of a 'slippery slope' from mainstream science to creationism.

To be precise, there is a substantial difference in attitudes towards realism when we compare science on the one hand with biblical studies and related theological disciplines on the other. Scientists are more likely to believe that their interpretations uncover something real and objective behind the text ('what really happened'), while those trained in biblical studies and theology are generally more cautious about the derivation of truth, and are more sensitive to the importance of metaphor. John Polkinghorne, for instance, one of the foremost thinkers in the science-religion field, has been criticised on this count for being too straightforwardly realist in his thinking (even if he claims a rather complex version of 'critical realism'; Allen 2006, 33-40), and for being insufficiently aware of the subtleties of theological language and symbol (Hefner 1998, 539; Pedersen and Trost 2000, 980). On the other hand, theologians can be accused of being rather too ready to retreat to metaphor and symbol when realist claims become conceptually challenging (and they are nowhere more challenging than in the case of the ascension of Jesus). The upshot is that, if theologians can see scientists as naïve in their commitment to objective realism, then scientists can see theologians as unduly cautious in their retreat to metaphor. There is therefore a need for closer understanding over the question of realism in the science-religion field, between those trained theologically and those trained scientifically, a method of dialogue in which each may benefit from the ways in which the other apprehends the core data (the reality) underlying 'grand ideas'.

Gadamer's 'priority of the question'

One potentially useful hermeneutical strategy that allows science to come naturally into conversation with theological approaches to reality is that of Gadamer's 'priority of the question'. In *Truth and Method* Gadamer warns against the imperialist inclinations of the natural sciences, and of their tendency to subsume all within their sway, a point noted gravely by others (Thiselton [1997] 2003, 146; Usher and Edwards 1994, 33-36). Gadamer insists that science performs its most effective task when it understands its limitations:

In a time when science penetrates further and further into social practice, science can fulfil its social function only when it acknowledges its own limits and the conditions placed on its freedom to maneuver. Philosophy must make this clear to an age credulous about science to the point of superstition (Gadamer [1975] 1989, 552).

Therefore, against the tendency of science to be the master of all that it surveys (largely by casting the world into its own 'explanatory' mould), Gadamer points out the creative power of dialogue. It is harder to ask a truly penetrating question than it is to answer it, he points out, which means that,

To someone who engages in dialogue only to prove himself right and not to gain insight, asking questions will indeed seem easier than answering them...[T]he path of all knowledge leads through the question (Gadamer [1975] 1989, 363).

Clearly, Gadamer is not offering an easy journey towards objective realism, but his point is that, to proceed as if there should be only one answer to a question is to close dialogue down before it has begun. If, on the other hand, dialogue is open at every turn, then the art of questioning – the art of dialectic – is truly the art of thinking, says Gadamer. It is only the person who is open to the truth in the other's questions who can persist in the dialogue: 'Dialectic consists not in trying to discover the weakness of what is said, but in bringing out its real strength' (Gadamer [1975] 1989, 367). We may add to this that the art of questioning is also the art of engaging with the other, without seeking mastery. But Gadamer has said it better:

To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were (Gadamer [1975] 1989, 379).

Quite so. Transformative communion should be the meat and drink (as it were) of the best theological discourse, recognising that truth is an *emergent* property of dialogue (Thiselton 1980, 309).

Although he does not explore it in depth, James Dunn (2001) suggests that Gadamer's method may provide a means of resolving the interpretative problems underlying the ascension traditions of the New Testament. Dunn speaks of the 'hermeneutical spiral' which facilitates an enlarging of one's understanding of the text at the same time that it enlarges one's own self-understanding. And indeed, this inspires Dunn to bring science into his final analysis, albeit in the negative. The ascension, Dunn believes (2001, 320), is a reminder that the life of Jesus breaks out of our native presuppositions and worldview, even that of a 'Newtonian mechanistically conceived cosmos'.

Dunn is right to point to the inability of the Newtonian view to enter into this particular hermeneutical conversation: its implicit determinism, and its exaltation of space and time to infinite and perpetual absolutes make it well-nigh impossible to conceive of the ascension in Newtonian spatio-temporal terms. However, we must point out, *pace* Dunn, that science has come a long way since Newton, and may be encouraged to go further in the spirit of Gadamer. The rest of this paper will therefore explore this very point, presenting something of a Gadamerian to-ing and fro-ing between different perspectives on the realities at stake.

After outlining the relevant New Testament texts, and describing the strengths and weakness of common readings of them, we shall present a theological perspective which is cautious towards realist claims, and which is concerned to hold metaphor and symbol to the fore. This will then be queried by a relatively naïve perspective which corresponds approximately to the kinds of realist approach adopted by science. A critical textual perspective will then be considered, before we allow the various perspectives to engage freely with each other, without necessarily clarifying at that point which is which.

The New Testament and ascension

In the hermeneutical exercise that we are proposing, the imagery employed is of central importance. The scriptural witnesses to the ascension of Jesus invariably couch it in spatial terms, most obviously in Luke-Acts (Luke 24:50-51; Acts 1:6-11), where Jesus is ‘carried up’ into heaven on a cloud. The other synoptic Gospels do not describe the ascension (except in one of the alternative endings to Mark – 16:19), and it is a moot point whether they even know of the idea as such; on the other hand, their talk of the Son of Man coming again on the clouds (e.g. Mark 13:26) is compatible with the idea that this is how he went in the first place. The idea of ascension is represented in various other places in the New Testament through talk of the final ‘leaving’, being ‘taken up’, or ‘going up’ of the earthly Jesus after the resurrection (e.g. John 16:28; 20:17; 1 Tim.3:16), or of his heavenly exaltation, where Jesus sits at God’s right hand (e.g. Rom.8:34; Eph.1:20; Heb.1:3; cf. Ps.110:1).

The interpretative challenges presented by this spatial imagery are extreme, and Luke’s ascension passages in Luke 24 and Acts 1 present them in their sharpest form, which is why we shall concentrate on them in this article. Luke paints the ascension as the final chapter in the seamless narrative of the earthly Jesus, as a concrete historical event in our time and space. More to the point, Luke paints the ascension as an event that appears to involve a space journey to a geographical destination in the universe called ‘heaven’. The literal impossibility of this scenario from the Newtonian perspective means that many of us prefer to brand Luke’s ascension as ‘metaphor’, although the fantastic qualities of this journey in fact take it beyond the category of metaphor. There has been extensive discussion of the precise meaning of the term ‘metaphor’ in the science-religion field, and of its relationship to ‘analogy’ within the critical realist view (e.g. see Gerhart 1988 versus van Huyssteen 1988). It is sufficient for our purposes to point out that a metaphor generally works by being rooted in earthly terms: it is a means for us to frame a concept *beyond* our grasp through the terms of a concept *within* it. From that point of view, the phrase ‘Jesus went away on a long journey’ (cf. Luke 19:12) might qualify as a metaphor of the ascension, but ‘Jesus went up to heaven’ does not qualify in any clear sense as a metaphor, since ‘heaven’ is a location entirely beyond our ken. Consequently, Luke’s narrative of the ascension, whatever else it may be in terms of genre, is not obviously metaphor *as a whole*, although it contains metaphorical components. This is a subtle but important point: our Newtonian presuppositions might prevent us from a ‘literal’ reading of the text, but by the same token the text does not allow us to take refuge in the blanket category of ‘metaphor’.

A related but equally problematic tactic for accommodating the ascension to modernist scruples is to assume that Luke’s narrative was a hostage to the fortune of his times, and operated within a primitive cosmology where heaven really was considered a concrete place ‘up’ in the sky. That is as it may be, but Luke actually possesses more sophistication than he is often given credit for, not least because the ‘heaven’ to which Jesus ‘ascends’ was just as out of reach for Luke as it is for us today, whatever the details of his cosmological views. And we should not forget that the Newtonian cosmology which informs our own gut-instincts about Luke’s ascension story has itself been made obsolete by advances in physics over the last century. These advances present many outlandish challenges of their own to a ‘common sense’ view of the universe, especially if such a ‘common sense’ view is in fact the Newtonian view, where the universe is characterised by absolute space and time stretching into infinity, is deterministic, and contains all that there potentially is. We shall expand on this shortly, but will note for the time being that modern reticence towards the ascension is often based on the scientific thinking of a previous age. In any case, close examination of Luke’s most detailed ascension text in Acts 1 indicates that it possesses something of a *visionary* dimension, which neither the ‘literal’ nor ‘metaphorical’ approaches to the text are

able fully to apprehend. Detailed discussion of this point is beyond the scope of this article, but the essence of what we are saying is that Luke's story intentionally articulates a mystery in spatial and visual narrative categories, a mystery which is not easily systematised or demythologised into a 'grand idea' or kernel, especially one amenable to science.

What is the idea of ascension? – the view from systematic theology

In spite of this last point about Luke's resistance to systematisation, modern theology – insofar as it has addressed the ascension seriously – has taken another view, and some notable attempts have been made to incorporate the ascension within wider views of Christology and ecclesiology. In these, the aim has been to settle upon a systematic statement or kernel of thought by which the ascension might be placed alongside other key theological statements. In short, theological approaches seek broadly to determine the 'idea of ascension'.

The starting point has generally been a concern, not to explore the details of Luke's ascension texts *per se*, but to affirm the *incarnation* of Christ, the act of the divine Son becoming human in Jesus of Nazareth. The salient question here is whether he is still human as we are human, now that he is no longer on earth but in an exalted state. Various possible answers have been explored (Hill 2012), but we will remain with the traditional Christian desire to maintain the perpetual humanity of Christ. This gels most closely with Luke's emphasis on the *bodily* reality of the risen Jesus, and it means that the idea of ascension becomes in essence a spatio-temporal conundrum, encapsulated in the problem of where the physical body of Jesus is to be located now. He is currently alive in something of the way that we are, but he is not here since he has 'gone up high above all the heavens' (Eph.4:10). As Robert Jenson (1997, 202) explains:

There is in a Copernican universe no plausible accommodation for the risen Christ's body; and, indeed, within any modern cosmology, the assertion that the body is up there someplace must rightly provoke mocking proposal to search for it with more powerful telescopes, or suggestions that perhaps it is hiding on the "other side" of a black hole. But if there is no *place* for Jesus' risen body, how is it a body at all?

As Jenson goes on to point out (*ibid.*), many believers overcome the difficulties here by assuming that the risen Jesus is not embodied as we are: he is in effect everywhere (which in physical terms means nowhere); he is a 'spook', and the ascension falls into the category of mythology, telling of a story that cannot in any clear way be allotted a place in history, in space and time as we know them. Here we find the nub of the problem: Luke's narratives may resist categorisation as 'metaphor', as we explained above, but they are instead regarded as prime candidates for 'mythology'.

Jenson's solution is to affirm the bodily reality of the risen Jesus, and of its significance for the church, in terms of present *encounter*: the 'body of Christ' is whatever the risen and ascended Christ's availability is to us in our space and time, i.e. as the 'body of Christ' ('the bread and the cup and the gathering', *ibid.*, 205). This is well said by Jenson, but in emphasising the *symbolic* tokens of Jesus' presence with his church, there is a danger here that the profound absence left by Jesus' *literal* departure – an absence filled by the giving of the Spirit – might be forgotten. After all, Jesus' symbolic presence with his church is only a temporary solution until the return of his incarnate presence:

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Cor.11:26)

Correspondingly, Douglas Farrow (1999; 2011) engages with the bodily whereabouts of the ascended Jesus by emphasising his *eschatological* whereabouts. The risen Jesus is a new creation, and the ascension is therefore a movement more in time than in space, with the result that we will locate Jesus in the future at his second coming. If we are to ask of the *present* location of the heaven to which Jesus entered at his ascension, we will find that it is not an already-existing place but the creation of a new one (2011, 46); we cannot speak of Jesus' *present spatial* location so much as his *eschatological temporal* location.

T. F. Torrance, in his classic *Space, Time and Resurrection*, also highlights the special nature of time in the spatio-temporal complex of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Here, human time is not abrogated or violated, but redeemed and re-created by the risen Jesus (Torrance 1976, 98). Since Christ is both divine and human, this 'new time' is united with eternity in a hypostatic union. Torrance's view of the ascension is therefore closely bound up with his view of the incarnation, and pivots on a relational notion of time and space (*ibid.*, 126, 129-30):

Hence if we are to be faithful to the nature of Christ as very God and very Man we have to let that determine our thinking of the incarnational event, and say both that he really and fully became man, as we men are in space and time, and yet remained God the Creator who transcends all creaturely being in space and time, and work with a *relational view of space and time* differentially or variationally related to God and to man. Unless we think in this way we cannot really think the incarnation itself without falsifying it...In the incarnation we have the meeting of man and God in man's place, but in the ascension we have the meeting of man and God in God's place, but through the Spirit these are not separated from one another (they were not spatially related in any case).

Torrance's use of space and time is heavily metaphorical: if we cannot speak of the ascended Christ's space and time in purely 'creaturely' terms, then we may speak of them as fluid markers of relationship between human and divine. As David Fergusson explains in his treatment of Torrance's ascension theology (2012, 99):

Time and space are not absolute containers, independent of the objects they happen to contain. Instead, they are functions of those principles or forces that by their actions define their form.

As with Farrow's view then, so with Torrance we are to imagine ascension time and space as fundamentally *dynamic qualities* by which Christ relates to God, to this creation, and to the new creation. The question then arises: to what extent do time and space – as science describes and constrains them – adapt to such a treatment?

The view from science

Torrance's approach finds some support in relativistic physics, in the notions that space and time are not Newtonian eternal and independent absolutes, but are relative to some degree, to the extent that we might refer to them in one breath as 'spacetime'. Against Torrance though,

we note the use of the phrase ‘to some degree’ in that last sentence. For spacetime is not a fluid and allusive quality that may be moulded to suit theological whim, but a mathematical and physical concept that is, in principle, open to empirical testing. Here again we find a mismatch between scientific and theological accounts of reality that do not easily sit together. Theology is free to use a scientific idea as a metaphor, but it should be clear that it is just that, not a solution to a deep mystery in real spacetime, which latter issue is exactly what is at stake in the ascension.

A scientific view would therefore continue to press the most difficult realist question of all, which cannot easily be fudged by metaphorical sleight-of-hand, namely where is Jesus actually located in real spacetime, if we are to continue to affirm his bodily existence? In order for his incarnation and bodily resurrection still to have meaning to us as embodied beings ourselves, the risen and ascended Christ should be found in space and time, even if it is not *our* space and time, nor even perhaps *like* our space and time.

Two hypothetical solutions present themselves. The first is that of ‘hyperspace’, the idea that reality might contain one or more additional spatial dimensions to the three with which we are familiar. A being who can travel in hyperspace would be able to appear and disappear at will in our three-dimensional reality, simply by moving into the invisible fourth dimension. Some of the most obstinately-difficult New Testament miracles, such as the Virgin Birth or the Feeding of the 5000, are amenable to this approach (Hudson 2005, 195-204). Indeed, the ascension becomes particularly easy to explain in terms of the hyperspace hypothesis, since we simply say that the risen and ascended Jesus is located just out of our reach in an invisible spatial dimension of this universe. The multiple dimensions that arise in superstring theories (such as M-theory) offer a way of exploring this idea in the context of theoretical physics (e.g. Polkinghorne 2005, 171-3; Wilkinson 2010, 126). Joshua Moritz (2002), for instance, has used the idea of the ‘ekpyrotic universe’ to suggest that we could conceptualise heaven as the higher-dimensional manifold that contains our own four-dimensional spacetime universe. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus are therefore not two events so much as one: they represent Jesus’ bodily metamorphosis after his death, which gave him the ability to exist in the higher dimensional (‘transcendent’) reality where God and the angels dwell (*ibid.*, 70).

The second solution is equally hypothetical, but perhaps better known. Now a commonplace of theoretical cosmology, the *multiverse hypothesis* offers any number of spacetimes for Jesus to be found in, beyond ours. If he is not to be found in *our* universe, then there are many other universes at hand for him to ‘ascend’ to, one of which we might even label as ‘heaven’ for these purposes. Many find it odd to speak in such realist terms of transcendent notions such as ‘heaven’. Nevertheless, Christian tradition has always been clear that heaven may well be a *transcendent* location with respect to our earth, but it is nevertheless a *created* location (Gen.1:1). There is therefore a certain logic in affirming ‘heaven’ as the particular universe in the multiverse where Jesus is to be found.

Of course, for many in the science-religion field, to raise the topic of the multiverse as a theological opportunity is to raise a red rag to a bull, not least because it is so often seized upon as an *anti*-theological opportunity by critics of religion, where it becomes a convenient non-theistic riposte to the puzzling uniqueness of our universe as expressed by the anthropic principle (e.g. Dawkins 2006, 134-147). However, the multiverse idea has certain attractions for our purposes in attempting to explicate the problems of the ascension. If the multiverse can be relied upon to provide convenient spacetimes beyond ours to locate an answer to the troubling conundrum of the anthropic principle, then it can certainly be relied upon to locate

an answer to the troubling conundrum of the ascension. There is, of course, the small matter of how Jesus could be said to travel in spacetime in this way, and some have suggested the concept of the ‘wormhole’ to provide a possible mechanism for Jesus to travel beyond our universe (e.g. Antonacci 2000, 310). Indeed, the idea that the resurrection appearances of Jesus might have been facilitated by spatiotemporal travel through a wormhole from the eschatological future has been discussed – albeit with caution – by George Murphy (2009).

It will not have escaped the reader’s attention that such ‘explanations’ using hypothetical ideas such as hyperspace or the multiverse multiply fantastic scenarios beyond what might normally be considered to be credible, at least when scrutinised through Newtonian ‘common sense’ spectacles. On the one hand, this is the wonder of much of modern physics, which illustrates the maxim that ‘truth is stranger than fiction’ so abundantly that new students to physics are often struck by its complete preposterousness. On the other hand, it is clear that, in consigning Jesus to an alternative universe accessible through a wormhole, we are constructing a modern-day myth which rivals Luke’s in its commitment to baroque extravagance and untestable cosmological presuppositions. Indeed, we might even wonder whether the mystery of the ascension has thereby become yet more impenetrable than it was in Luke’s day. For sure, we have added at least three extra difficulties in attempting to model it scientifically here. First, in putting the problem in realist/scientific terms as a literal spatio-temporal riddle which is soluble only by introducing extra dimensions or universes, we run the risk of falling foul of those who accuse scientist-theologians of incorrigible realism in their thinking. Second, while it is no doubt tempting to write-off Luke’s ascension story as ‘metaphor’ (when we really mean ‘myth’), it is instinctively harder to do so when it is couched in the language and ideas of modern physics. Third, and most serious, there are the questions that arise from the act of boiling down Luke’s story to a spatio-temporal problem in the first place (the ‘idea of ascension’). In particular, we must not forget the important visionary and symbolic motifs that appear in the New Testament ascension texts. Put bluntly, are we not selling the New Testament traditions short by boiling them down to an ‘idea’? Where, for instance, in the spatio-temporal problem, is the exaltation at the Father’s right hand? – where is the lordship of the entire cosmos? – where is the, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing into heaven?’ (Dunn 2001, 315). Are these merely secondary motifs, which easily evaporate in the course of boiling Luke down, and can therefore be ignored? Or are they truly primary?

A critical response from the perspective of biblical studies

This third point forces us to reconsider the scriptural witness to the idea of ascension, and the way that biblical scholars have sometimes viewed the question of reality.

The fact that the New Testament writers, including Luke, see the ascension not as a problem to be faced-off, systematised, or avoided (still less a spatio-temporal problem), but rather as a theological *opportunity* of the highest order, suggests that we should not fight shy of their formulations, nor write them off too quickly as ‘metaphor’ or ‘myth’. Rather, we should face up to the challenge of their particulars. In which case, the ascension becomes a matter for *hermeneutics*: the question of reality in the ascension is displaced away from boundless metaphysical speculation about other spacetimes to the reality of *texts* and of rhetorical form, to the discourse set up between author and reader, between speaker and listener. Walter Brueggemann has pointed out that our Western intellectual inheritance means that we prefer to understand reality in *ontological* terms over *rhetorical* (Brueggemann 1997, 64-65).

Against this, he makes a case for understanding the reality of biblical theology through the utterance of the text (*ibid.*, 19):

The God of the Bible is not ‘somewhere else,’ but is given only in, with, and under the text itself.

This is not to say that there is no objective reality of God (nor of the risen and ascended Jesus) outside of the text, nor that the text is a ‘sacrament’ of the ascension, but it is simply to say that our only ‘objective’ access is through the text, and through our own interpretative discourse concerning it. The profound absence brought about by his ascension means that, *without the grounding of the text*, the risen and ascended Jesus is a flight of fancy, the product of our imaginations, not the incarnational reality of Christian faith. Another way of saying this is that there are some truths that are not amenable to unsupported ontological reasoning, but must be apprehended through utterance of the scriptural text. And yet another way of putting this, in terms that respect Luke’s own purpose of witness (Luke 24:48) is to say that the presence of Christ cannot be abstracted from his identity proclaimed in and through the Scriptures, since they are the Christian community’s consensus grounding for both revelation and *kerygma*.

A textual perspective upon the question of the location of Jesus therefore points back to the texts – he is here before our eyes, in Scripture. The texts are the foundation for talk of both the presence and the absence of Jesus, which must be expressed pre-eminently as *talk*, as *proclamation*, and as *dialogue*, before it can be meaningful as ontology. But to build upon the texts towards an ontology, the time-honoured methodology of historical biblical criticism will only get us so far. Talk of ascension cannot proceed without talk of cosmology, both ancient and modern, and of what lies beyond it (Farrow 1999, x). Therefore, even though the hermeneutical spiral may begin with the text, it must travel through the territories of both modern science and theology before it can return to the text, and move on again.

The hermeneutical spiral – engaging biblical study, science, and theology

Always at the heart of this hermeneutical dialogue is the question of reality. If theology tends to adopt a more cautious view towards reality claims than science, then biblical criticism can veer between the two. To some extent, this reflects the nature of the texts under the spotlight, and we must briefly examine them again at this point.

We have so far focussed on Luke’s texts of ascension. But we should acknowledge that there are many more to consider, because ascension is a rich – albeit largely overlooked – motif in the biblical and apocalyptic literature. Any comprehensive account of New Testament traditions should explore their fertile Old Testament precursors to begin with. The idea of Jesus going up to God is of course preceded by Dan.7:13, and by the ascension of Elijah (and a number of other biblical figures in the intertestamental literature), while the idea of Jesus’ exaltation to God’s right hand reflects the major Christological text of Ps.110. *Ascension is no minor feature of the scriptural witness*. And we must also take account of biblical descriptions of Jesus’ resurrected reality, the reality which, according to Luke, ‘ascends’. Foremost among these is Paul’s description of the resurrection body in 1 Corinthians 15, as that of a mysterious eschatological *transformation* of which we can say little with any confidence (e.g. vv.35-54). Luke, on the other hand, insists upon the earthy, material reality of the risen Jesus: the risen Jesus is flesh and bones like the disciples (Luke 24:39), eats

broiled fish (vv.41-43), and is 'carried up' into heaven (v.51); Luke's risen Jesus is rather more like us than is Paul's, at least in terms of bodily reality.

These differences between Paul's and Luke's descriptions of the resurrection body are paralleled by the differing approaches to reality adopted by theology and science. For while theology might share Paul's concern to emphasise Jesus' transformed *otherness* as an eschatological reality, science has a more *immediate* view that parallels Luke's concern to emphasise Jesus' earthiness. It would seem that, to focus on one of these views to the exclusion of the other would be to lose something of the scriptural reality of the risen Jesus. Likewise, to systematise over them would be to lose something of the diversity they represent.

It is important then, to hold Luke's and Paul's accounts of the reality of the risen Jesus in equal and opposite tension. It might be tempting to sideline Luke on account of the conceptual challenges of his more *earthy* view, but there is much to be said for facing up to his challenge. To those of us trained in the natural sciences, theology's possible bias towards the Pauline perspective, where the intangibility of eschatological transformation is highlighted, can suggest a hint of evasion. Theology may confess the bodily objectivity of Christ's incarnation, but it appears reluctant in the final analysis to follow such a concrete view of reality (as Luke offers) through to its completion. Seim (2003, 23), for one, has noted the tendency in modern theology to avoid the *spatial* embarrassment of the ascension by instead speaking of it as a *temporal* transference into a future eschatological domain. Against this, a scientific perspective would point out that such an eschatological solution in any case involves a temporal vanishing act from our world just as much as does a spatial solution, a vanishing act which is ironically not unlike Luke's story of Jesus' ascension, where he is pointedly taken out of the sight of his disciples (Acts 1:9).

To be sure, our universe is no longer Newtonian, and neither is that of Jesus. And consideration of the modern relativistic perspective in physics indicates that an eschatological/temporal expression of the idea of ascension will be no more meaningful in incarnational terms than a spatial narrative expression such as Luke's, since spatial and temporal categories are linked together into 'spacetime'. This means that a spatial problem cannot straightforwardly be overcome by a temporal solution, nor vice versa. The relativistic concept of 'block time' is another way of looking at this, and it suggests that our sense of 'flowing' time is a subjective illusion, to be replaced by a view where all spacetimes in our universe are considered alongside each other as a 'block'. If so, what are we then to do with the eschatological/temporal solution to the ascension, which assumes the perspective of 'flowing time'? For that matter, what are we to do with much of Christian theology, which is not only imbued with a 'flowing time' view of eschatology, but which privileges end time (*kairos*) over regular time (*chronos*)? These are difficult questions from a scientific perspective; they beg a theological response which has so far been lacking, with the exception of a very few (e.g. Wilkinson 2010). One possible solution is to return to the multiverse hypothesis, since it offers a realist way of speaking of all times and all places in a way which might perhaps be translatable into Christian eschatology in the light of relativistic physics. There is confessional value in following such an exercise through to its conclusions, since the search for realist solutions to the problem of the ascension resists docetism and plunges wholeheartedly into the incarnational unknown at the heart of Christianity. But even here we are at the risk of being branded with a realism which is both unsubtle and lacking in theological nuance; this, however, would seem to be a risk which the science-religion field must always take in its relationship with theology as a discipline.

My point is that, if in Christian theology we are to face-up to the notion of bodily incarnation, at the same time as facing-up to Scripture as a vehicle for the revelation of Christ's continuing identity and presence, then we cannot so easily consign theological mysteries entirely to eschatology, especially if by that we mean the far-off future. I do not wish to suggest that there is a modern solution to the mystery of Luke's story of the ascension in the block view of time or the multiverse hypothesis; rather, I wish to insist that theological mysteries should be discussed rather more wholeheartedly in the spirit of state-of-the-art scientific realism than has been the case so far, and without attempting to systematise or marginalise what can sometimes be a difficult and contrary biblical witness. And I wish to suggest a method for doing so: an open and free-ranging dialogue in the spirit of Gadamer, between physics, theology, and biblical study.

Conclusions

To return to the question that has been at the heart of much of what we have said – where is Jesus to be located? – the point of this article is to suggest that the question cannot be answered directly, if at all. Nevertheless, it must still be asked, again and again. Theology can only approach the question if it is open to the help of a science and a biblical study which are in turn open to mutual dialogue with theology. If we think of this in terms of Gadamer's hermeneutical notion of the 'priority of the question' – of the importance of asking the truly penetrating question over trying to answer it – then the problem of the ascension means an ongoing dialogue between science and biblical study which can only proceed theologically, and which can only proceed in terms of questions. Sometimes it is the most naïve questions which are the most penetrating, and indeed, we find that it is science in its commitment to a materialist realism which asks the most penetrating questions here, and only theology supported by biblical hermeneutics which can provide anything like the appropriate answers – answers which are in turn questions. But this is a vital point, because from a scientific perspective most theological approaches are often too ready to resort to 'metaphor' and 'mythology' before the realist questions have been exhausted. It is therefore the task of science to keep the dialogue active. If, in other aspects of the science-theology field, it is science which is leading the way and theology which is reactive, then the roles are reversed here. Discussion of ascension becomes the point of redress, where any tendency towards scientific imperialism is reversed, and science must learn to ask the appropriate questions in order to help theology to advance the dialogue, rather than to close it down before it has begun.

I have reached the end – a conclusion of sorts – but I have by no means articulated an answer, still less a satisfying 'idea of the ascension'. But then, in the spirit of Gadamer's 'priority of the question', an answer would seem to me premature. This article has attempted to illustrate something of Gadamer's dialogical communion by doing just that: allowing science, theology and biblical studies to query each other over some of the ascension traditions of the New Testament. Short of diving into the texts in detail, I have taken the dialogue as far as I know how at present. Of course, it helps to have been trained in both physics and biblical studies, because it allows me an element of internal dialogue as I write. But dialogue properly requires two external and independent partners. One author such as myself, even one who has been trained in two disciplines, can only take it so far. But with two partners, or even more...well, then we may ascend to places that none of us has yet aspired to.

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